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Inaugural address by the President of the Republic of Tunisia

Honourable Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tunisia, which will in a few days be celebrating the fifth anniversary of the 7 November change, extends to you a warm welcome and is proud to participate with you in this United Nations meeting on human rights in Africa. The fact that this meeting is taking place in Tunisia adds even greater lustre to our anniversary in that we have made human rights one of the pillars of the society we are building day by day. We have placed human rights at the top of the political agenda where they remain the key values on which our concept of government is based.

Welcome once more to you all, to the land of change and human rights. Welcome to the representatives of African States, of United Nations bodies, of international, African and Arab organizations, and of non-governmental organizations, as well as to the noble defenders of human rights.

The promotion of democracy and radical social change can be achieved only through the strengthening of a human rights culture and of all the channels that communicate its message. Similarly, bodies responsible for the protection of human rights must be developed and diversified so they can achieve their noble aims in the service of mankind in every sense of the term. For mankind is both the means and the end of any genuine process of change.

In this regard, tribute must be paid to the role played by the United Nations, as well as all the instruments it has drawn up and machinery it has established over the past 50 years. In issuing and proclaiming a wide variety of conventions, agreements, and other instruments and in creating United Nations bodies throughout the world, the international community will have fulfilled its duty to protect and promote human rights the world over and

to build on humanity's historic achievements, maturity and progress in which all nations have participated, and from which have sprung the universal values and principles embodying mankind's aspirations to freedom, dignity and justice.

Tunisia, being one of the first countries to ratify human rights instruments, and proceeding from its commitment to the human rights achievements of the international community, urges member States to subscribe to an increasing number of conventions and agreements and to incorporate them in their domestic legislation.

It would be remiss of me at this time not to pay tribute to the role played by the regional organizations and in particular the Organization of African Unity (OAU), of which Tunisia is proud to have been one of the founder members; we hope that OAU, too, will adopt more conventions and instruments to complement the work of the United Nations on the regional level. I must also take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as our support for and active involvement in the work of the African Commission on Human Rights and People's Rights.

We would also like to mention the importance of this historic period which our African continent is going through, a period rich in democratic experiments and social change. These developments certainly deserve the international community's support and attention in promoting their positive aspects, making good any shortcomings and overcoming the difficulties that may be encountered along the way, particularly as Africa continues to experience poverty, disease and hunger and as our societies have as yet been unable to root out the seeds of religious and ethnic discord and intolerance. Herein lies the danger, for these evils may find, in the process of democratic change, the conditions on which they thrive and, if unchecked, may become the greatest threat to the democratic environment that enabled them to emerge.

We are gratified by the efforts of States, Governments and peoples and by the outstanding role played by international and regional organizations and their subordinate bodies, and reaffirm our commitment to the machinery and instruments reflecting an international consensus. We also pay tribute to the non-governmental organizations, be they local, African or international, for their significant contribution to the noble humanitarian task they are performing and for their efforts in promoting a deeper awareness of the values of human rights and their culture. The non-governmental organizations must also be thanked for their highly constructive contribution to the work of Governments and various international bodies, complementing the efforts made by various elements of society.

There is no more noble task than this since it rises above political struggles and the tangled webs of interests typical of any society. This is what makes continued cooperation and permanent contact between the non-governmental organizations and Governments one of the most vital areas for protecting and serving human rights in a context of positive interaction and genuine dialogue.

While responsibility for the success of the process of democratic change in Africa lies with the peoples and politicians of the continent, the

international community also has an important historic duty in this regard, namely, to strive ever harder in consolidating and strengthening the democratic transition process and to resist the temptation to impose models that are stereotypes; rather it must seek the most appropriate ways to encourage specific experiments by giving the creative forces of all peoples free rein so as to enable them to make their own way forward in the direction of sound democratic change.

The task of supporting and promoting human rights is the collective responsibility of States, international and regional organizations on a worldwide scale and, at the local level, the responsibility of the State itself, the individual and the various component elements of society, in addition to non-governmental organizations and institutions. For this reason, cooperation has to be the rule, along with respect for the legal framework within which it takes place on the domestic and international levels. This means that our shared duty is to strengthen this legal framework and these international institutions, bolster their credibility and prevent them from being used for purposes other than those for which they were intended, or exploited by one group to the detriment of others. These bodies must remain a means for stimulating and promoting progress and help us steer our experiments in democratic transition through the hazardous waters of the economic difficulties being experienced by our continent, crushed as it is by its debt burden, poverty and countless other problems. In this context, the promotion of human rights - not only political and civil but also social, economic and cultural - is a slow, arduous and complex long-term task. Whence the importance of the role of international solidarity in human rights matters, as well as that of the cooperation that must be established between north and south and given real meaning.

While we fully appreciate the argument that respect for human rights must be regarded as one of the cornerstones of relations between States, we feel that those advancing this argument should be realistic and assist the developing countries in creating a suitable climate and appropriate conditions enabling these noble values to take root; indeed, we consider that they are even under a duty to do so.

One of these conditions is assurance of a minimum standard of living for the peoples of the developing countries that laboured for years under the yoke of colonialism which, after independence, was replaced by political regimes that failed to attach due importance to democracy and human rights. How, after all, can a person be expected to understand these concepts and subscribe to them when he is unable even to satisfy his most basic food, health and education requirements?

It is precisely in this regard that the developed countries and specialized agencies could play an effective role by helping, in various ways, third world countries to overcome their economic difficulties, such as the debt burden which weighs heavily upon them, impeding their development and thereby hampering efforts to promote democracy and human rights. We therefore consider that any support for the third world countries is in essence support for the cause of democracy and human rights, which transcends national frontiers and involves mankind as a whole.

Human rights constitute an indivisible entity, since they comprise the rights of the individual and the group, political and civil rights, and economic, social or cultural rights. For this reason, we have always affirmed, since the change of 7 November 1987, that there can be no democracy without development, and no development without democracy.

Development and democracy are two sides of the same coin and inseparable, and neither can be given priority over the other. This is reflected in everything we have achieved, and in all the measures and decisions we have taken. We have associated all elements of our society with this integrated process and attached special importance to women, for human rights cannot thrive in a society where the status of women is inferior to that of men. The progress achieved by women must be consolidated and their potential fully tapped, for otherwise we will fail in our attempt to achieve effective overall change.

Nor have we lost sight of our children - the citizens of the future - whose rights we are protecting and promoting through the establishment of appropriate machinery. We have also done everything necessary to ensure that vulnerable social groups are not left behind and marginalized, for we believe that every member of society is a full citizen endowed with rights and duties.

A new future lies ahead for Africa, and we hope it will live up to our development, democracy and human rights expectations. Yet these expectations can be realized only through a daily collective and concerted effort by all and a long-term conscious commitment to the universal values of human rights so that they become an integral part of ourselves. This effort must be unrelenting if we are to erase the vestiges of apartheid and to achieve co-existence and tolerance between various nationalities, religions and cultures on the basis of our civilization, age-old African wisdom and the sum total of all noble humanitarian values and ideals.

There can be no democracy or future for human rights if terrorism, violence or religious, racial or cultural extremism are given free rein or disregarded and, in the guise of human rights, are allowed to emerge and expand. Presenting society with narrow-minded proposals, these forces reject alternatives and openness in the name of specificity and authenticity, focusing only on what suits their political ends, and either out of an appetite for power or simply a determination to dominate in an arbitrary manner, cast aside everything that is not to their taste so as the more easily to do away with fundamental freedoms.

Human rights are universal values and do not admit of any exclusion or selectivity. True specificity and authenticity come into the picture only in the way these rights are perceived and put into practice in specific situations so as to achieve certain tangible goals.

Just as we reject stereotypes in the name of universality so we cannot accept that this universality should be eclipsed in the name of specificity.

Bearing in mind the principle of universality and the need for cooperation to ensure the success of experiments for democratic change in the third world countries in general and in our African continent in particular,

States and various organizations must, in their promotion of human rights, avoid being selective and differentiating in any way between civil and political rights on the one hand and economic and social rights on the other.

They should also help to protect human rights against all dangers, and particularly against those posed by extremist organizations and factions that resort to violence and terrorism. International and human rights organizations must not close their eyes to the true nature of these factions and must review their attitude to them so as to ensure that the noble aims of human rights bodies are not exploited for pernicious purposes.

Human rights education and training are among the most important guarantees for the future; they are also one of the best ways of increasing awareness of these rights and making them a part of every citizen's life. Governments, institutions, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, as well as the various elements of society, play an essential role in this respect. For this reason Tunisia is gratified that a number of these institutions and organizations, such as the regional branches of Amnesty International, the Arab Institute for Human Rights and Greenpeace, have established themselves on its soil.

And I am pleased on this occasion to be able to announce to you that Tunisia is also prepared to provide a home for the headquarters of the international secretariat of the African Commission for Law and Development, so that Tunisia can be the home of human rights - the focal point and hub from which this Commission's activities can radiate.

Tunisia has always been in the forefront of countries providing effective support to and proclaiming solidarity with people struggling for emancipation and freedom, since it is firmly convinced that the rights of peoples are an integral part of human rights. It has consistently stood - and continues to stand - at the side of the brotherly Palestinian people in their struggle to recover their land and rights, and in their desire for negotiations and dialogue as a means of promoting the peace process on the basis of international legality.

Similarly, Tunisia has always been in the forefront of countries standing at the side of the South African people in their struggle to dismantle the system of apartheid and erase its vestiges. And it has consistently supported all African peoples in their struggle for dignity and freedom.

Proceeding from our commitment to protect human rights as an indivisible whole, regardless of religious beliefs, nationality, identity and culture, we wish to express our deep concern about the forced eviction and genocide of the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina in complete disregard of the most basic humanitarian values and principles. Our sympathy for this people and our concern for their fate stem from our firm conviction that respect for the will of peoples and the protection of their cultural identity and right to self-determination constitutes an appropriate basis for the sound development of the human rights process, whether in Palestine, South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina or any other country in the world.

We welcome your initiative in convening this first preparatory regional meeting of the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights and express our support and commitment to the noble aims you are seeking to achieve. We also pay tribute to Africa's continuous readiness to contribute to the enrichment of the world's heritage in every possible sphere.

You have before you an agenda which is impressive not only because of its component items but also because of its objectives, and one which will doubtless highlight Africa's role in the international community and especially in the field of human rights. In this way, Africa will be able to contribute in no small measure to the promotion of various United Nations international conventions, treaties, other instruments and machinery, as well as to the enjoyment by all peoples, groups and individuals of their rights, the protection of their dignity and the fulfilment of their obligations towards one another in an atmosphere of respect, tolerance and cooperation so that justice, security and stability can prevail and that all will be assured of progress and a decent life.

May God crown your efforts in the service of our continent and mankind as a whole with success.